

---

## UNIT 9 MEDIEVAL HISTORIOGRAPHY — ARABIC AND PERSIAN

---

### Structure

- 9.1 Introduction
- 9.2 The Early Arabic History Writing
  - 9.2.1 Eighth and Ninth Century Historians
  - 9.2.2 Tenth Century Historians
- 9.3 Arabic Historians of the Later Period
- 9.4 Persian Historiography
- 9.5 Summary
- 9.6 Exercises
- 9.7 Suggested Readings

---

### 9.1 INTRODUCTION

---

The origin of historiography in Arabic (or in Islamic civilisation) is to be sought in the *Quran* and *Hadis* (i.e., Prophetic Tradition). The detailed references to the Prophets and their followers of the past contained in the *Quran* created a historical sense among the Muslims, and it grew stronger with the passage of time. It makes its readers conscious of the fact that history is a continuous process, influenced by important ideas of the great men whose appearance on human scene is a great event of history. It also provides historical information concerning the life and actions of the Prophet and the community which he gave leadership. All this created awareness about time among the Muslims who realised the need to compile the history of the life and times of their Prophet and his immediate successors for the benefit of posterity. Every effort seems to have been made by the early writers of Islamic history to ascertain the authenticity of the sources of information, because the *Quran* teaches its followers to ascertain the truth. The critical method, called *Silsilah-i Isnad* (chain of narrators) employed in ascertaining the authenticity of report about a historical event helped the historians achieve objectivity in their approach to a great extent. In fact the importance of the source and cross checking it with corroboration from other sources to establish authenticity was first established during the process of the compilation of prophets actions and his sayings (*hadis*). These compilations were done by scholars for providing interpretations of various events as also for legal purpose. The criterion was to verify the authenticity of a tradition on the basis of the chain of narrators, the teachings of the *Quran*, the life of the Prophet and also the Arabic language spoken and written during the time of the Prophet. This was an important historical method that explains the change in the character and critical accuracy of historical information amongst the Arab historians. In fact, this makes the Arabic historiography an important part of Islamic culture. Recognising its significance in the history of history-writing, the Jewish scholar, Bernard Lewis remarks: 'Interest in the past soon became a distinguishing characteristic of Muslim Civilization. Since early times Muslim entities-states, dynasties, cities, even professions have been conscious of their place in history; they have been interested in the deeds of those who went before them and anxious to record their own for those who came after. Almost

every dynasty that ruled in Muslim lands has left annals or chronicles of some kind; in many countries, including some of high civilization, serious historical writing begins with the coming of Islam.’

---

## 9.2 THE EARLY ARABIC HISTORY WRITING

---

However, the beginning of scientific historiography in Arabic may be traced to the second century of Islam (8th century AD) and is associated with the life and activities of the Prophet. Before it, there was a memory bank to serve as a source of information. In other religious traditions the memory banks existed for thousands of years but in Islamic tradition it was replaced by written sources after the end of the first century of Islam. No doubt, human brain has astonishing capacities to preserve information about the past, yet the long passage of time could distort the information and events. This distortion or different version of the events and actions of individuals made the task of scholars difficult. In view of this scholars tried their best to preclude that eventuality by various means of scrutiny.

### 9.2.1 Eighth and Ninth Century Historians

A large corpus of historical literature was produced by the Muslim scholars in Arabic during the second century of Islam. Efforts were made to collect all oral traditions floating down the stream of time. The oral traditions were critically examined and incorporated after their veracity had been ascertained on the basis of source criterion. As the writers were motivated by religious spirit to compile their works on the history of Prophet for the benefit and guidance of their contemporaries and the posterity, their works are valuable because the historical information contained therein was carefully sifted, separating facts from popular legends and fiction. In other words, the historians took pains to separate historical jewels from dust and pebbles. Of the early historians, mention may be made of Ali bin Muhammad al-Madaini (died: 840 A.D.). He was a prolific writer, reported to have composed hundreds of books. His works on the history of Caliphate and monographs on the history of Basra and Khurasan are of great importance. Though none of his works have survived the ravages of time, the passages quoted by other writers in their works testify to the importance of his pioneering efforts. By applying the sound methods of criticism, he gained fame for his work and it served as a source for the compilations of the succeeding period.

Inspired by Al-Madaini, Muhammad bin Omar al-Waqidi (died in 823 A.D.), Ibn Sad (died in 845 A.D.) and Ahmad bin Yahya Al-Balazuri (died in 811 A.D.) composed important works that left enduring impression which is discernible in the critical accuracy of historical information amongst the historians of the succeeding period. Al-Waqidi's history has been written in a plain narrative style. His *Kitab al-Maghazi* gives a comprehensive account of the campaigns led by the Prophet. Ibn Sad utilised it in the preparation of his history of the Prophet but supplements it by incorporating the Prophet's edicts, letters and copies of agreements that were available. As regards Ahmad bin Yahya Al-Balazuri, he brought to completion his celebrated history, entitled *Futuh al-Buldan*, sometime after 861 A.D. The study of the extant copy of *Fatuh al-Baldan* shows that before its completion, the compiler had prepared an earlier version which was more voluminous. Al-Balazuri seems to have incorporated all the information that he had collected from different sources. Later on, he revised it and deleted what he thought inauthentic and not corroborated by other historical facts gathered. Therefore, his revised version became invaluable and was preserved by the posterity. Besides information about the life and achievements of the Prophet and the important events that took place during the times of the Caliphs, the Arab conquests of the non-Arab lands, including Iran, Makran

and Sind provinces in India have been incorporated in this work. Like other Arab historians, he widens the scope of history by departing from pure political events and account of conquests. He also described the professions and socio-economic conditions of people in the conquered territories. For example, while describing northern Baluchistan, called Kaikan in those days he writes that it was inhabited by a tribe of Turks who maintained horse breeding centres. He says that the horses bred by them were admired by Caliph Muaviyah as of excellent breed to serve as war horses.

### 9.2.2 Tenth Century Historians

The classical tradition established by the above-mentioned historians reached its culmination in the celebrated history of Muhammad bin Jarir al-Tabari (died in 923 A.D.) entitled *Tarikh al-Rasul wal-Muluk* (History of the Prophets and Kings). It needs to be pointed out that Al-Tabari was primarily a traditionalist (expert scholar of the Prophetic Tradition), and in his history he aimed to supplement his commentary on the *Quran*, by presenting the historical tradition of Islam with the same fullness and critical approach as he had done in the earlier work. But against this weakness must be set the positive excellence of the rest, which by its authority and comprehensiveness marked the close of an epoch. He spared no efforts to verify the evidence he accepted for inclusions in his work. No later compiler ever set himself to collect and investigate afresh the materials for the early history of Islam, but either abstracted them from his *Tarikh*, sometimes supplemented from Al-Balazuri, or else began where he had left. It may also be added that Tabari's history is the first source to record the great appeal that the teachings of the Prophet had among the youth and the downtrodden people in the early days of Islam. He points out that the early companions of the Prophet, most of whom were looked down upon by Meccan aristocrats for their low social status became the leaders of Islamic revolution. Further, Tabari's *Tarikh* pointed out the ideological commitment to Islam and the ideological unity of the Muslim community across the lands although the political fragmentation had taken place during his own times. In short, his *Taikh* is valuable in so far as it registers the socio-religious changes brought about by Islam, such as the rationalisation of religious and para-religious phenomenon, development of scientific curiosity and of a critical sense which entailed a new organisation of knowledge and mastery of the world imagination.

With Al-Musudi, (died in 956 A.D.), a junior contemporary of Al-Tabari, a fresh intellectual element enters into Arabic historiography. Al-Musudi is, indeed, entitled to be reckoned amongst the major Arabic historians. He was not only a historian but also a geographer in his own right. His geographical information was gained chiefly by his wide travels. He was thus able to add a new dimension to Arabic historiography by combining geography with history since human history exists in a definite environment. Al-Masudi describes the environment of a country with the history of its people in his work, '*Muruj al-zahab*' (Meadow of Gold). He recognises the principles of scientific description and of correction and coordination of human action and physical facts. Though Al-Masudi frequently indulges in 'Cosmographical' theories borrowed from earlier works, his main contribution was the application of the results of his travels and personal observations to history and the recognition of cause and effect in related phenomenon — human and physical — through the comparative study of different parts of the known world. It is also worth pointing out that Al-Masudi is the precursor of Ibn Khaldun, the late fourteenth century Arab historian who is considered a philosopher of history and the father of modern sociology. Because Al-Masudi's *Muruj al-Zabab* rests on certain theoretical foundations; its author reflected thoughtfully on the method and purpose of history. All this made early Arabic historiography rich both in content and quality. It also led the scholars to recognise it as a science in its own right. With this recognition, history entered in a period of rapid expansion. From the

third to the sixth century of Islamic era, a large number of historical works were written. These included the important works on the history of different regions of the Islamic World. Each region had its own history compiled by a regional historian. For example, Abd al-Rahman bin Abd Allah Ibn Abd al-Hakam (died in 871) composed the history of Egypt and the Arab conquests in the West. It is noteworthy that in this work the account of conquests is based on the traditions, a mix of authentic and untrustworthy local ones. More sober and matter-of-fact, probably, were the local histories compiled during the third century of Islam. All of them seem to have been lost except for one volume on the history of Baghdad, compiled by Ibn Abi Tahir Taifur. As for those which were produced after the third century, some of them have survived and contain much valuable material not available in the earlier general histories. This additional material is of great importance because it supplements a large amount of historical information. Another significant development which must be taken note of is that the 4th century of Islam onwards, the recording of political history passed mainly into the hands of officials and courtiers. This change affected form, context, and spirit of history writing. It was an easy task for such officials to compose a running chronicle rather than a critical analysis of the events and people associated with them. The sources from which they drew their information were largely official documents and their own personal contact with the court and activities taking place around them. It was inevitable that their presentation of events was to be influenced by their own bias and reflected narrow social, political and religious outlook of their class. These historians seem to concentrate mainly on the activities of the ruler and the happenings at court. However, the information provided by these authors with regard to the external political events of the age is generally more reliable notwithstanding their limitations. This is testified by the historical accounts of Egypt and of Andalusia (Arab Spain) written by Ubaid Allah bin Ahmad al-Musabbihi (died in 1029 A.D.) and Ibn Haiyan al-Qurtubi (died in 1076-77 A.D.).

---

### 9.3 ARABIC HISTORIANS OF THE LATER PERIOD

---

With the formation of a large number of local dynasties in all parts of the Islamic world a new trend in the form of dynastic history writing emerged. This trend more pronounced from 11<sup>th</sup> century onward supplements the traditional historiography which continued during the period. This introduced a personal element in history writing as the rulers began to engage and patronise historians to write the history of their dynasty as per their wishes exaggerating their achievements. Now history became a work of artifice full of rhetoric and an involved style replaced simple narrative. This style was popularised by *Tarikh al-Yamini*, composed by Al-Utbi (died in 1035) in writing the history of Subuktigin and Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna. The writers of such accounts may not be guilty of deliberately distorting facts but their style showing servility and lack of any critical analysis places their work in the category of poor history. These works are in no case be regarded as representative of Islamic History of the classical period which had been patiently built up as a science by the early generations of Muslim scholars. One significant point to be taken note of is that the subject matter of such historical writings, produced under the patronage of the Sultans is more political than politico-religious. The element of religion is brought in them only for a specific purpose as and when required. More often it finds a place only when the patronage extended by a Sultan to the *Ulama* (religious divines) is to be highlighted or when the Sultan's God fearing nature and religiosity are to be praised. This at times led to the growth of a historiography both in Arabic and Persian from the eleventh century to glorify the actions of Sultans for the cause of Islam.

It was at this unfavourable juncture that historical works began to be written in Persian. Before passing to discuss the nature of Persian historiography, a brief reference should be made to the histories of Abu Raihan al-Biruni (died in 1048) and Izuddin Ibn al-Asir

(died in 1293). Al-Biruni applied mathematical and astronomical science to the determination of chronology in his *Asar al-Baqia*, while Ibn al-Asir's history marks the re-emergence of the scholar-historian along side the official historian. Ibn al-Asir's history, called *Al-Kamil* is remarkable for its compiler's attempt to give less static presentation of history, by means of grouping the events into episodes within an annalistic framework. The elegance and vivacity of his work acquired for it almost immediate celebrity, and it became the standard source for later compilers. It is also worth-mentioning that in his account of the ruling dynasties outside Arab lands, Ibn al-Asir incorporates popular tales which were devoid of historical basis. Lastly, mention should be made of the world-famous historian, Ibn Khaldun (died in 1406). As a chronicler his work is sometimes disappointing. He is however, held in high esteem as a historical philosopher. His *Muqadima* (an introduction to history) is a treatise on the philosophy of history. It has been rendered in different modern languages for its importance. It is a pity that, inspite of the brilliant school of Egyptian historians in the following centuries and the vigorous cultivation of history in Ottoman Turkey (where a translation of *Muqadima* was made in the 18th century), no historian was influenced by his philosophy. There is no indication that the principles which he put forward were even studied, much less applied, by any of his successors.

As for the significance of Ibn Khaldun's *Muqadima*, the sociological aspects of his historical theory, described therein are important. The originality of his *Muqadima* is to be found in his objective analysis of the political, social and economic factors underlying the establishment of political units and the evolution of the state. It may also be mentioned that the materials on which his analysis rests were derived partly from his own experience and partly also from historical sources relating to the history of Islam. The difference between him and his predecessors is that the latter begin from the global conception of human society, where as he (Ibn Khaldun) begins from a dynamic conception of human association. His principles are not theocentric, and his views on causality and natural law in history are in blunt opposition to the Muslim theological view. He treats religion as no more than one factor, however important it may be. According to him, the law of the state may be derived from religion, but the state abstracts itself in practice from the whole compass of its validity and follows its own aims. The state exists for the protection of people and ensuring the order in the kingdom. It may also be added that he was not an irreligious man. He was a devout Muslim. However, in propounding his theory, Ibn Khaldun tries to reconcile the ideal demands of the *Sharia* (Islamic law) with the facts of history. He believes that economic development and prosperity can be achieved if the ordinance of the *Sharia* is observed. To him the caliphate in Islam was an ideal state. He discusses in detail the organisation associated with the caliphate. He explains in the course of discussion the gradual transformation of the caliphate into an ordinary kingship due to the force of *asabiya* (love of kindred) during the later Umayyad period, the later Umayyad caliphs had their family members regain ascendancy over the religious enthusiasm. In short it is his *Muqadima* that lifts him to the rank of a great philosopher of history.

---

## 9.4 PERSIAN HISTORIOGRAPHY

---

As regards the beginning of history writing in Persian language, it was prompted by the emergence of Persian-speaking intelligentsia, which was not conversant with Arabic in the eastern part of the Islamic world. By the close of the tenth century A.D., the non-Arab Muslims in Iran and Central Asia felt the need to produce literature on Islam and its history in Persian language for the enlightenment of people. It is noteworthy that many of the earliest works were translations and abridgments of Arabic classics, beginning with the translation of Tabari's *Tarikh* in 963 A.D. by the Samanid Wazir Abu Ali al-Balami.

Few of the local and dynastic histories written in Persian have survived, and there is little to distinguish them from the contemporary Arabic works, produced under the patronage of kings. The surviving histories written in Persian by Abu said Gardezi (*Zain al-Akhbar*) and Abul Fazl Baihaqi (*Tarikh-i ale Subuktigin*) are outstanding contribution to historical literature in Persian. Though Gardezi drew largely from Al-Biruni's account of Hindus and their religion, yet we find additional materials in his *Zain al-Akhbar* on the reign of Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna (died in 1030). The importance of Baihaqi's work appears from the fact that it was based on original state documents and a diary which the author used to maintain.

It is also to be noted that the celebrated works, *Zainal-Akhbar* of Gardezi and *Tarikh-i ale Subuktigin* of Baihaqi, (composed around 1050 A.D.) were produced in the tradition of Arabic writers on Islamic history. Neither Gardezi nor Baihaqi seem to have been influenced by the ancient Persian historiography wherein historical fact and fiction were mixed up for the sake of literary embellishment. However, the changes that took place in polity and culture under the impact of regional Sultanates should not be lost sight of by the historians. Their historical writing do reflect on the innovations in Muslim polity, yet the emphasis therein show that the compilers were serious enough to point out the virtues and evils of a reign. They were also very particular about establishing the authenticity of an event before incorporating it in their respective works. Unlike the ancient Persian historians, their works are free from mythological elements or fiction. These works became models to inspire the long line of Indo-Persian historians. It may be added that of the several volumes of Baihaqi's *Tarikh*, only one, related to Sultan Masud's reign (1030-1040) has survived. This surviving volume shows that the centralisation by Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna of political power continued under his successors also. That all the officers and soldiers were paid their salary and allowances in cash and revenue assignment in lieu of cash salary was not a regular practice. In fact, the process of enhancing military profession was caused by the war-making function of the monarchy.

---

## 9.5 SUMMARY

---

Inspired by the *Quran* and *Hadis*, the Arabic scholars began writing history in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. Apart from what was available in the *Quran* and other Islamic texts, efforts were made to collect the material from oral traditions also. The life and activities of the Prophet and his followers formed the main theme of these early histories in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries. Later on, along with these earlier themes, certain different themes such as history of religion, of conquests and of Islamic rulers were also taken up. With the development of local dynasties, the dynastic histories acquired prominence and became the main theme of the later Arabic and Persian historiographies.

---

## 9.6 EXERCISES

---

- 1) Discuss in brief the early tradition of Arabic historiography upto the 9<sup>th</sup> century.
- 2) What are the unique features of history-writing in Arabic in the 10<sup>th</sup> century?
- 3) Write a brief note on the changes in the Arabic historiographical tradition in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries.
- 4) Give a brief account of early tradition of history-writing in Persian. Did it follow the Arabic tradition?

---

## 9.7 SUGGESTED READINGS

---

D.S. Margoliouth, *Lecturers on Arabic Historians*, Lectures V and VI.

Shukrieh R. Merlet, 'Arab Historiography', Article published in the *Islamic Culture*, Hyderabad, Vol.LXIII, No.4, October, 1989, pp.95-105.

Franz Rosenthal, *A History of Muslim Historiography*, Part 1, The Introductory Chapter.

Hamilton A.R. Gibb: 'Tarikh from the origins to the third century of Hijra' pp.108-119 in *Studies on the Civilization of Islam*, London, 1962.

